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AUTHOR Sharan, M. B.
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ABSTRACT

Conditions in India that contribute to child abuse and neglect are discussed. Sections focus on child rearing practices, discipline of children at home and in school, the nation's six million abandoned children, child sexual abuse, causes of abuse, poverty, lack of education, characteristics of abused children and their abusers, situational factors and the socialization process, sex problems of adults, and the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect. Thirty-three references are listed. (RH)

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M. B. SHARAN INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT IN INDIAN FAMILIES

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Indian families are famous for maintaining long-term relationships. This, however, does not mean that everyone is happy in the family. Since India is a poor and overpopulated country, many children do not get proper care. Many of the parents also do not know how to rear children. As a result of all these, children get neglected in many families. Similarly, some children do not have parents or any other guardians to look after; some are handicapped; some are delinquents; some are illegitimate; and so on. Such children are brought up in orphanges, homes for the homeless, reformatories, etc. Here, they are maltreated and abused. Unfortunately, these problems of child abuse and neglect are yet to be considered as a social problem. In order to discipline a child, many physical punishments are used. In this process, unfortunately, many parents and teachers are using overdose of it. This results in "reaction" rather than "correction" on the part of the children. Again, sex life in India has many restrictions. As a result, adults are compelled to commit sexual abuse against easily available children. This paper, therefore, proposes to review the nature of child abuse and neglect in Indian families and promises to offer some concrete suggestions.

India is a vast and poor country with more than 830 million of people of different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. It adds about 2 per cent of its population every year which is more than the total population of Australia. Of the total Indian population, 46.9% of the males and 24.8% of the females are literate, 60 to 75 per cent depend on agriculture, and 39.2% are children below 15 years of age (*Khanna and Verma, 1990*).

Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, Dist. Midnapur, West Bengal, India 721302.

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India believed in joint family system for many years. This system worked so well, particularly in the rural area, that even today extended families are common among the uneducated people. In an extended family minimum three generations live together under one roof. In urban areas, however, the extended families are breaking fast and they are being replaced by nuclear families which consist of a married couple with two/three children. About 25% of the families today are of this small size. The percentage of families with more than ten members is not more than seven (*Das and Bardis, 1978; Goode, 1982*).

Child Rearing Practices

Marriage is one of the most important events in the life of an Indian. It is generally arranged by the parents through negotiations. Negotiations are mostly initiated by the parents of the brides which are economically and socially oriented. Even then, marriage in India is such a strong bond that both the partners are expected to maintain it life-long. This is the reason why Indian families are considered to be the best example of long-term relationships. In a long-term relationship, however, someone has to pay price for its maintenance (*Holtzworth-Munroe and Jacobsen, 1985*).

Marriage gives full adult status to males and females. Parenthood, however, discriminates between the birth of a boy and a girl in Indian society. Since many parents face a lot of difficulties in arranging marriages of their daughters, they prefer sons to daughters. The feeling of unwanted child, however, comes only when a family has two/three daughters without any son. For generations, boys and girls have been treated separately in almost all societies of the world. Girls have been praised for their maternal behaviour whereas boys have been for ideal masculine traits. The socialization of girls emphasizes nurturance, dutyfulness, obedience, and dependence more than that of boys. Similarly, boys are more strongly pushed toward achievement and self-reliance than are girls. And what begins in infancy, continues through the years (*Rohrbaugh, 1979; Thompson and Walker, 1989*).

These sex role differences are so wide in every society that

'husband' and 'wife' represent two different classes of people (*Syfers, 1971*). In Indian culture, however, these differences are not "natural" — they are of discriminatory nature. Boys are preferred to girls, females are expected to serve males, and in this process, the girls are abused and neglected more than the boys. Unfortunately, statistics are not available to compare the two sexes but it's a hard fact.

Since India is a poor and overpopulated country, many parents find it difficult to take proper care of their children. Moreover, many parents also do not know how to take care. As a result of all these, children get neglected in many ways. They are deprived of even basic things like food, clothes, medicines, toys, etc. It is not possible for a child to understand that his/her parents are unable to provide all these. Therefore, the child goes on insisting, and the parents, having no other alternatives, start beating. Sometimes, beating is so severe that it has adverse effect on his/her personality. Thus, in many Indian families, children are beaten very often for their no faults. The frequency and nature of physical assaults, however, vary from child to child, family to family, and parents to parents. Since physical assaults on children are yet to be recognized as a social problem, no survey has been done so far to estimate their percentage. But it's a fact that in spite of love and affection towards children, almost all parents use physical punishments to control them at one time or the other. Unfortunately, many times such punishments are in higher degree for which parents also repent later on.

Training and Educating Process

Physical punishments are also used to discipline and train a child. The child is physically assaulted, hit, beat up, slapped, or spanked by the family members, teachers, or others. It has been noted that many times they use overdose of punishments and underdose of rewards while teaching. This results in "reaction" rather than "correction" on the part of the children. It arouses resentment, and often rejection of the parent or parental substitute. Since many of the parents and teachers have their own problems and suffer from their own conflicts, they release their

tensions by using children as pegs for hanging their emotions. Unfortunately, in the process of releasing tensions on the juniors, children are the worst victims as they are under all having under none. This is the reason why one can hear a child crying somewhere at anytime (*Fontana, 1973*). Such physical punishments are of no use and do more harm than good. "Punishment helps to create an attitude of fear, anxiety, or rejection as the individual approaches the possibility of violating a rule. ...extreme punishment, like extreme social deprivation, may eventually cause the child to develop neurotic or psychopathic behaviour" (*Goode, 1982, p. 89*).

In addition to physical abuse, many children are also the worst victims of an oppressive and misguided education system and emotional abuse. These emotional abusers are nobody but their parents. Unfortunately, these bruises are such for which police stations have no records nor do the victims have any scars to show. Almost the only evidence of this kind of abuse is aberrant behaviour of the child. Very often it is seen that parents want to achieve something through the child — mostly their own failed dreams, or things that they have missed in their own lives. The mother wants to prove how good a mother she is and how superior her child is compared to others' children. Thus starts the battle for the child who gets caught in the cross-fire between the parents, the education system, ambitions and the ever-present bogey of the child's future.

The parents try their best from the age of 2 - 3 years of the child to secure admission in a good school. They enlist well-known tutors who are reputed to be able to teach the child the magic password for entry into these institutions. So by the time the child is 4 to 5 years old, he becomes tired and listless, as he has no time to play, and is excusably fed up of studies. Similarly, parents also try to shower opportunities on their children by giving them scope to achieve proficiency in everything. And for this, they take their children to different classes after school hour like music, dance, swimming, yoga, drawing and painting, football, tennis, and so on. Unfortunately, in many cases, these classes are not for pleasure but for achievement. Now, after spending the whole day in a school and playing games in the evening, the child finds it difficult to sit

for study and the homework in the night. Parents, then, abuse the child for not studying properly. They, however, never admit that actually, they are guilty of emotional child abuse.

Ofcourse, it would be unfair to blame the parents squarely with the onus. In the competitive world of today, the child is born with the burden of his future, and his entire student life has to be lived in preparation for this momentous state of being. The education system has thus brought its own degeneration. Knowledge is no longer imparted to the young, instead, they have to gobble up bulk quantities of information in their attempts to become a human encyclopaedia and succeed in their interviews. These being the prerequisites for a successful career in modern times, parents feel justified in pushing their children for a good career. In this process, many children not only fail to enjoy their childhood, but by the time they grow up, they are blessed with more than their share of behavioural problems and psychosomatic disorders (*Bagchi, 1990*).

Abandoned Children

According to a very rough estimate, there are six million abandoned children in India (*Lal and Chakraborty, 1990*). They have been relinquished by unwed mothers, young widows, poor widowers, and others. These children are brought up in orphanges, homes for the homeless, reformatories, jails, etc. Here, they are maltreated and abused in many ways. Many of the orphanges are really in bad condition and therefore they cannot provide even the minimum to these children. Similarly, in every big city, several thousand children are found roaming in the streets, working in the tea stalls or roadside hotels, garages, and in the redlight areas. In all these places, they are exploited and abused like any thing. Some of them are even forced to beg and work for the criminal gangs. Since these children have been driven onto the streets by the fortune of their parents, there is nobody to hear them. At the time of war again, a large number of refugee children cross the border and take shelter on the road. Though every abandoned child is supposed to be examined by the Juvenile Court (or appropriate district court), the high percentage of such children and the attitude of the society and

the government towards them do not allow the courts and the adoption agencies to function properly (*Chakraborty, 1990; Lal and Chakraborty, 1990*).

Child Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse committed against children is another serious problem of Indian society. Though only a few cases are reported in the Newspapers, a substantial number of children and women are sexually victimized every year. Such practices are common in orphanges, reformatories, jails, school/college hostels, and other places of shelter. However, in many cases it is not possible to know who-does-what-with-whom. Premarital sex, extramarital sex, homosexuality, or any other kind of sexual relationship with anyone other than the spouse is considered to be such a shameful act in India that even the victim would like to deny about it. In such circumstances, it is difficult to collect empirical data on sex life of the Indians. A researcher, therefore, has to depend on his/her own experience and guesstimation, and has to use indirect methods to know about it.

Actually, there are many restrictions on sex life in India. No one is allowed to have it with other than his/her marriage partner - and that also in a restricted way. Naturally, many are obsessed with sexual desires most of the times. A boy can marry after finishing his education and getting a job (but not before 21), a widow cannot marry easily, many married persons cannot live with their spouses due to certain family or job problems, some are even not allowed to marry in certain jobs, some parents cannot arrange marriages of their daughters due to financial difficulties, and so on. In such circumstances, one is compelled to have it in his own way — through masturbation, homosexuality, heterosexuality, or through any other kind of perverted sexual act. However, he has to take care of others' not knowing about it. Similarly, there are some married couples who are not happy with their partners. Some are even beating their wives. Naturally, it is not possible for such persons to have full sexual satisfaction within marriage. As a result, they try to have it outside as well. But all such persons, who try to have sex outside, are under constant fear of being caught and suffer

from guilt feelings. In Indian culture, therefore, the best way of having sexual satisfaction is within the marriage. Though sex is still immoral and dirty for many wives, and, if it is for pleasure, it is for the husbands only most of the times, they never complain of the marital rape as commonly done in western countries. (*Miller, 1976; Tiefer, 1979; Finkelhor et al., 1983*). Perhaps every wife has the realization that her husband is fully dependent on her for his sexual satisfaction. Similarly, every husband knows that his wife takes maximum possible care of him (*Kapadia, 1958; Kumar, 1984; Panda, 1990*). With such feelings, they are never at varience with each other, and they ever remain faithful to each other (*Prabhu, 1958*). This kind of mutual understanding keeps every couple united life-long, and allow both the partners to get more and more from each other every time in sex.

This does not mean that there are no sex problems in India. Actually, there are many (*Rao, 1977; Kapur, 1978; Kothari, 1987*) as sex is "overpracticed" and less "understood" phenomenon. However, many of the problems are with those who are unmarried, who are staying away from their spouses, who are homosexuals, and above all, who are psychopaths. The real threat of child sexual abuse comes from these persons. If a person does not have a "proper definition" of sex and a "proper channel" to satisfy it, he/she is bound to commit sexual abuse. It will be committed against whom depends on his/her sexual preference, availability of the partner, and the risk and cost involved in it. Since it is a private affair, the person manages in his/her own way — sometimes through persuation, sometimes through seduction, and sometimes by using authority and force. Since too many children are available in India, and many of them are unclaimed and helpless, they are bound to be the worst victims. Intrafamilial child sexual abuse, however, is rare in India. It is mostly with the children of other families, particularly with the poor and helpless boys and girls. Sometimes, even the minor girls are the victims of gang rapes.

Causes of Child Abuse

It is clear from the above discussion that there are many

causes of child abuse and neglect in Indian families. Poverty, lack of education, characteristics of the child and the parents, social situation, socialization process, and sex problems of the adults, however, seem to be mainly related to it. Since there are multiple and not single causes, this has a profound affect on the process of identifying and treating abuse. Moreover, child abuse is yet to be recognized as a social problem in India.

Poverty and lack of education

We have seen that many parents in India are very poor and illiterate. They are unable to provide even the minimum — food, clothes, medical care, and shelter — to their children. In such situation, all children born in poor families are maltreated and neglected. Unfortunately, the number of children in a poor family is higher than in a rich family because many of them get married early and do not follow the techniques of birth control. They also believe that the birth of a child is as per God's will and they should not stop it. It is thus natural that many children cannot get proper care in India and they are bound to be maltreated. And, if this is the fate of children with parents, one can very well understand the fate of abandoned children (*Lal and Chakraborty, 1990*). Poverty is also responsible for frustration, stressful situations in the family, and poor adjustments of the members which are risk factors for maltreatment of children (*Gil, 1970; Straus et al., 1980*).

Characteristics of the abused child and the abusers

There are certain characteristics that raise the risk of a child being abused. If the child is rigid, disobedient, overdemanding, or problematic one, parents, other family members, teachers, and neighbours use more and more punishments to control him/her. Since punishments fail to correct the child and invite reactions on his/her part, parents and others, feeling helpless, use still higher dose of punishments. Thus a vicious circle starts and the child is abused like anything. According to Gelles and Cornell (1985), any child who is considered somehow "different" seems to run a slightly greater risk of maltreatment.

Though many of the studies have found little difference between abusers and nonabusers in terms of personality characteristics, emotional immaturity, depression, impulsiveness, mental illness, and psychosis have emerged as some of the important factors. It has also been noted that many of the abusive parents tend to have unrealistically high expectations for their children. Some researchers, however, believe that what personality factors have been found, they tend to be associated with being labeled an abuser rather than actually being related to abuse.

Social situation and socialization process

Stressful situations such as presence of a handicapped person in the home, death of a family member, prolonged illness, and breaking toys and other articles frequently are found linked to higher rates of abuse and violence. Poor housing conditions and larger than average family size are also risk factors for maltreatment of children (*Johnson and Morse, 1968; Gil, 1970; Straus et al., 1980*). Some researches indicate that parents who abuse their children tend to be socially isolated from both formal and informal social networks (*Smith, 1975; Garbarino and Gilliam, 1980*). When parents are not engaged in a social network, they lack social support during times of stress. Moreover, they are less likely to change their behaviour to conform with community values and standards (*Steinmetz, 1978*). Thus, they are particularly vulnerable to respond violently to stress and not see this behaviour as inappropriate.

The cycle of violence suggests that those who were exposed to high level of family violence in childhood are more likely to be abusers (*Wasserman, 1967; Elmer, 1967; Straus et al., 1980*). This does not mean that all victims of childhood violence will grow up to be abusers, nor are people who have no violence in their childhood experience immune to violent behaviour as adults. But a violent background is a significant contributor to the likelihood that a person will learn, through socialization process, to be violent toward a child (*Gelles and Cornell, 1985*). Feshbach (1974, 1980) proposes that children learn how to aggress

by observing aggression in their families and in the surrounding society. To a young child the conceptual ambiguities involved in attempts to distinguish proper from improper aggressiveness may seem overwhelming, particularly if the child's parents utilize physical forms of discipline. This suggests that children who are exposed to aggressive models eventually learn "retaliatory norms" or social rules for the expression of aggression. Therefore, rationalizations of aggressive behaviour may act as cognitive mediators of the punitive discipline exhibited by abusive parents.

Sex problems of the adults

We have already seen that in India sex life has many restrictions. A real threat of child sexual abuse, therefore, comes from all those persons who are either unmarried or are unable to have proper sex satisfaction within marriage. There are many reasons for this, however, Finkelhor (1981) has suggested the following four preconditions for occurrence of sexual abuse of children :

(1) The adult must have sexual feelings for a child, or for children in general.

(2) The adult must overcome his or her internal inhibitions against acting out the general feeling(s).

(3) The adult must overcome the external obstacles to acting out the sexual feeling(s).

(4) The adult must overcome the resistance or attempts at avoidance by the child, if these occur.

According to Finkelhor's theory, "to explain abuse requires an explanation of the presence of all four prior conditions" (1981, p. 2). In Indian conditions, since many are obsessed with sexual desires most of the times and do not have proper way to satisfy them, they would like to use children for this purpose. It has also been found that many landlords were never happy with only one wife, and were always trying to have sex outside — either with the prostitutes or with the attractive boys. Perhaps, many adolescents and adults are still following the same tradition of "searching" teenage boys and girls for their satisfaction. But, if the teenagers are not easily available,

they would not hesitate to have it with anyone including young children.

Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect

We have seen that there are many causes of child abuse and neglect in Indian families : Poverty, lack of education, characteristics of the child and the parents, social situation, socialization process, and sex problems of the adults. Since there are multiple and not single causes, this has a profound effect on the process of identifying and treating abuse. However, one thing is clear : the roots of child abuse and neglect lie in the structure of the family and the society (*Gelles and Cornell, 1985*). We, therefore, should not emphasize on individual child abuser or a particular case of child abuse. We should recognize this problem as a social problem. Once it is recognized as a significant health and social problem of children, this will not remain hidden behind the closed doors of Indian household. This will give independent status to children and human service professionals to lodge a complaint against the abusers. This will also cancel the "hitting licence" of parents. Ofcourse, this can be done only by introducing an appropriate law by the government to protect children from abusers.

Many problems in India are due to poverty and lack of education. Unfortunately, all these are due to overpopulation. Unless this is checked, there cannot be much improvement in the situation. The government, therefore, should take strong steps in implementing the family planning programme. It should not be left to wishes of the people. By this approach, country like India can never be successful in reducing population which is the root cause of many of the problems including child abuse and neglect. Similarly, education has to be made available to all. It may not be higher education but it must be minimum and meaningful education. Once the parents realize the value of children, they will not like to neglect them.

We have also seen that many parents and teachers are using overdose of punishments to control and educate their children. This is another source of child abuse. First of all, punishment is not of much use in learning and the moment it becomes

overdose, it invites reactions on the part of learners. Unfortunately, this is what happens most of the times in the process of interactions with children : parents and teachers are using overdose of punishments and the children are reacting. We, therefore, need to educate parents and teachers for using appropriate dose of rewards and punishments — a combination of more and more rewards and less and less punishments.

India is facing another problem of too many abandoned and handicapped children. This problem, therefore, can be solved only by the government and adoption agencies. As per the requirements, the number of such agencies has to be increased. Similarly, the number of courts dealing with such children has also to be increased. These courts and agencies, however, can function smoothly only when they have sufficient staff members and fund to take proper care of children. Lal and Chakraborty (1990) have rightly pointed out that there are many childless couples in India who want to adopt children. If proper care is taken, a good number of abandoned children can be given to them for adoption. In that case burden on orphanges, reformatories, and other places of shelter will be reduced and children will get proper care.

The sexual abuse of children is another serious problem. As pointed out earlier, this is due to sex problems of adults. If everyone realizes that the best way of having sex satisfaction is only through marriage, then many will not like to have it outside. Today, many are not having proper definition of sex and proper channel of its satisfaction, and therefore, they want to have it anyhow with anyone including children. This kind of feeling has to be changed and a healthy attitude towards sex is to be developed through proper sex education.

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